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Becoming Aware of the Leader Within: Measuring the Impact of Mindfulness Practices on Leadership Development

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**Becoming Aware of the Leader Within: Measuring the Impact of Mindfulness Practices on
Leadership Development**

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May 15, 2021

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Abstract

The unprecedented events brought on by the global spread of COVID-19, along with the racial justice protest movement, have contributed to heightened mental, emotional, and physical distress among leaders. While research shows chronic stress and anxiety contribute to decreased focus, creativity, and overall well-being, mindfulness, the practice of being actively aware of the internal and external environment, can counter and mitigate those harmful effects that hinder effective leadership.

This research utilized a mixed-methods approach to examine the impact of mindfulness practices on three leadership competencies that an extensive literature review deems essential for successful leadership in times of uncertainty: self-awareness, stress and anxiety regulation, and self-efficacy. Findings from a pre-post survey confirmed participants demonstrated a significant increase in self-awareness and self-efficacy and a decrease in stress and anxiety. As one of the few studies to investigate the impact of mindfulness practice on leadership development, this research reveals the significance and potential of incorporating mindfulness practices in leadership programs.

Keywords: leadership; leadership development; mindfulness; self-awareness; meditation; yoga; authentic leadership; adaptive leadership

“The way out of our ruts in leadership requires shifting our orientation from one that focuses on techniques that motivate others to one that focuses on the leader’s own presence and being.”

- Edwin Friedman

Cultivating Mindful Leadership: Measuring the Impact of Mindfulness Practices on Leadership Development

One of the first courses I took at the University of San Diego as a Master's in Higher Education Leadership student was Integral Leadership Theory, which is an experiential learning class “designed to generate personal insights into one's own patterns of response to social forces and skills for leadership” (University of San Diego, 2021-2022, p. 5). In that class, I was introduced to adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009), which is the practice of mobilizing people through a meaningful process of lasting change in challenging environments. One of the key competencies of practicing adaptive leadership is to “take time to think through your interpretation of what you observe, before jumping into action” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009, p. 34), which is coined as “getting on the balcony” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009, p. 34). Up until that class, my understanding of leadership was authority, and traits like charisma that made one a leader. The practice of adaptive leadership was such a different approach to leadership than I had known it to be and I was struck by the mindful approach. As I furthered my studies in leadership theory, I found authentic leadership to similarly promote what sounded like mindfulness.

Personally, mindfulness practice has been a large part of my life for the past few years. I first began to meditate during a challenging, transitional period in my undergraduate studies. From there, I explored yoga, mindful eating and exercising, and breathwork. I grew interested in using mindfulness to learn more about myself from a holistic point of view of mind, body, and spirit. Through learning to connect deeply to my inner self with a sustained mindfulness practice, I learned just how interconnected the mind, body, and spirit are to each other. In 2020, I furthered my mindfulness practice by becoming a reiki practitioner, reiki being a form of energy healing, and Integrated Healing, a healing modality that incorporates psychology, applied kinesiology,

and many other practices. With each mindfulness tool, I grew in my self-awareness, ability to regulate my emotions especially during stressful times, and self-efficacy as I connected deeper to all of myself. As I delved deeper into my leadership studies, I would frequently come across the importance of competencies like self-awareness and emotional intelligence in leaders, and I began to wonder: how much of my mindfulness practice could contribute to my leadership development, especially as it relates to adaptive leadership? Was there a correlation? And if so, how exactly could mindfulness contribute to leadership development? I was eager to find out through my action research.

Another contributing factor that compelled me to pursue this research was the spread of COVID-19 and the start of what would become almost a year-long lockdown. In a rapidly changing local and global context, I experienced feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear. In March 2020, I lost my graduate assistantship at the University of San Diego (USD) due to COVID-related budget cuts. My part-time teaching position was also brought to a sudden halt as we could no longer gather in classrooms and would not resume for 6 months until September 2020, when the school finally implemented online classes. My graduate classes were suddenly moved online, and both faculty and I worked hard to quickly transition to remote learning and adjust to a new way of learning. While the ability to work and study from home was a welcome respite initially, the novelty of the situation wore off eventually. I was left with feelings of helplessness of not being able to plan for the future and fear of the growing situation over the pandemic. The racial justice protest movement that began with the murder of George Floyd by police in May 2020 further contributed to my increased stress, fear, and uncertainty. In an ever-changing world, I felt paralyzed and powerless. I began to question my role in society, in the workplace, and as a student. I felt insecure in my leadership abilities. Based on the

conversations I was having with friends and colleagues, I knew that others were going through similar emotional experiences. What would get me through this period of uncertainty? The answer was my mindfulness practice. After each mindfulness practice, I felt calm, focused, more optimistic. Instead of being paralyzed in fear and worry, I was able to entertain different interpretations of the same situation and take empowered action. Once again, I saw the potential of mindfulness practice to not only get me through challenging times but also allow me to guide others in the process.

The purpose of my study was two-fold: 1) to understand the impact of mindfulness practices on leadership development and 2) to develop my skills as a healing arts practitioner through creating mindful spaces and learn from the data I gathered to become a leader with an integrative approach. Targeting leadership studies students at the University of San Diego in particular, I had participants experience three distinct mindfulness practices (i.e., breathwork, yoga, and meditation) and measured the values of three qualities that literature deems important competencies for leaders in uncertain times (i.e., self-awareness, stress and anxiety regulation, and self-efficacy). Through mixed-methods surveys and the focus group, I came to understand how mindfulness could play a role in increasing self-awareness of the body and mind, decreasing stress and anxiety, and building self-efficacy, all of which contribute to effective leadership. Most importantly, I re-discovered my passion and purpose for creating mindful, healing spaces for individuals to grow in their self-awareness and mind/body/spirit connection so they can empower themselves to show up in the world and be the best leaders they can be.

I established the following questions to guide my research:

- How can mindfulness practices impact self-awareness, stress and anxiety, and self-efficacy?

- How can mindfulness practices contribute to leadership development?

Background

Defining Leadership

Leadership is a process of social influence towards a goal. There is growing evidence that an authentic approach to leadership is desirable and effective, both at the individual and organizational levels. Emerging leadership theories, such as authentic leadership, claim when leaders have a strong awareness of their inner self (i.e., values, beliefs, and strengths, as well as thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations) and act upon those beliefs accordingly, they experience positive effects on physical and psychological wellbeing, such as increased levels of self-esteem and self-acceptance (Avolio et al., 2004; Kernis & Goldman, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2003). Leaders who are self-aware can foster balanced processing of information (i.e., objectively analyze all relevant internal and external data before coming to a decision and/or taking action) and relational transparency (i.e., present oneself as authentic as opposed to distorted or made up), both of which speak to leaders' willingness to show others they genuinely care to understand their own leadership to serve others more effectively and equitably (Avolio et al., 2004). Furthermore, leaders who are self-aware can help others to foster positive self-development, organizations can collectively experience positive and enduring outcomes (Avolio et al., 2004).

Adaptive leadership is another emerging practice that calls leaders to help people navigate through a period of change by first learning to manage the self in the environment (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009). With change comes emotions like fear, panic, and discomfort, which can hinder leadership effectiveness. To practice adaptive leadership, leaders must know themselves in their values, purpose, and beliefs, possess the ability to diagnose situations objectively, predict patterns of behavior at the individual and systemic level, and invoke the

courage to mobilize others in times of uncertainty (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009). Heifetz and Linsky (2009) asserted, “Your whole self constitutes a resource for exercising leadership” (p. 37), which hints at the importance of connecting to and using the mind, body, emotion, and spirit for knowledge and guidance. They also made a particular distinction between authority and leadership. Authority is power entrusted for service, usually in organizational life; leadership is a practice, often disruptive and disorienting, that guides the self and others to find alignment between their values and their actions. Thus, adaptive leaders need not be limited to those who hold leadership roles or titles. Rather, leadership is within each and every person.

In recent years, the acronym VUCA (volatile, uncertain, chaotic, ambiguous) has been adopted to describe modern society, in which change is constant. In research conducted by Bywater & Lewis (2019) to identify the behavioral competencies of effective leaders in a VUCA world, they found context-setting agility (i.e., improve the ability to scan the environment and clarifying outcomes needed to be achieved), creative agility (i.e., transform problems into desired results), and self-leadership agility (i.e., affect and influence personal effectiveness), are critical “leadership agilities” (p.3). In particular, self-leadership agility is associated with increased self-awareness, greater mindfulness, and enhanced self-efficacy, which results in increased happiness, improved interpersonal relationships, and a deeper sense of commitment to one’s purpose. At the organizational level, self-leadership contributes to increased engagement, improved work performance, and enhanced creativity (Abid et al., 2020). Thus, self-awareness and self-efficacy are important for leaders to develop, especially in uncertain times.

Mindfulness in Leadership

Mindfulness is a state of being fully present, aware of oneself and others, and sensitive to one’s reactions to stressful situations (Ludvik, 2018). Mindfulness not only allows one to observe the internal landscape with compassion and curiosity, but also enhances self-leadership to steer

one towards a desired outcome (van der Kolk, 2014). In the field of clinical health and psychology, researchers have found that mindfulness helps to develop self-awareness, promote self-regulation, and increase self-transcendence (Vago, 2012). In the field of leadership studies, Ludvik (2018) claims mindful leaders tend to be more understanding and able to relate to others, motivating them towards shared goals, which make them more effective leaders. Frizzel et al. (2016) suggested leaders who practice mindfulness end up with a more balanced leadership style, develop greater self-regulation, and improve their self-awareness. Leaders who practice mindfulness are also able to enhance their resiliency in their leadership roles (Chesley & Wylson, 2016). Elrich (2015) found that leaders who practice mindfulness become clear on their values, avoid reacting to emotions, and take better care of their bodies and self. Finally, Kegan and Lahey (2009) argue that leadership development interventions should focus on supporting people to shift their consciousness (i.e., transform their current way of making sense of the world) so that they can take a broader perspective and increase their adaptive capacity; the higher the level of consciousness of the leader, the more success the organizational transformation (Harung, 1994).

While these claims are based on theoretical research, there is very little empirical data to prove these claims. Brendel, Hankerson, Byun, and Cunningham (2015)'s research on the impact of regular mindfulness practice on creativity, resilience, and tolerance for ambiguity, anxiety, and stress was one of the first of its kind. In this eight-week study, the authors investigated whether a weekly, 45-minute meditation session would improve five leadership qualities when compared with a weekly leadership course based on theoretical instruction. Pre-post survey results confirmed that participants who practiced mindfulness demonstrated an increase in focus, reduction in trait anxiety and stress, as compared to those who only took the leadership course; no significant changes were seen for resilience or tolerance for ambiguity. While these results are

promising, one study is not enough to prove the impact of mindfulness on leadership development. Thus, I hoped to contribute to the small body of existing literature based on empirical evidence of mindfulness practice impact on leadership development through this action research. Furthermore, as mindfulness can be experienced through a variety of practices such as yoga, meditation, and breathwork, I was interested in incorporating different mindfulness practices into this action research to gain broader insight.

Needs Assessment

I established the need for this research through conversations with my colleagues who found themselves stressed, anxious, and self-conscious in the spaces they occupied, especially at the onset of COVID-19. My personal experiences reflected similar sentiments, and I knew that this sort of experiential learning and community building was an important space to create, particularly in the midst of such uncertain times. At the time of planning my action research project, I started facilitating weekly meditations on a wellness website and writing meditation scripts for third parties in an effort to contribute to the creation of mindful spaces and hone my skills for leading meditations. In the summer of 2020, I became a reiki practitioner, and in the fall, an Integrated Healing practitioner. Slowly, I was gaining more knowledge in different healing modalities, and each healing tool under my proverbial belt confirmed my passion for creating mindful, healing spaces for individuals to grow in their self-awareness and mind/body/spirit connection.

My experience as a leadership studies student also illuminated the need for more spaces for mindful experiences/learning in this field. Integral leadership theory, which was a required course for my program, had an experiential learning component that allowed me to integrate my learning with experience, and I looked forward to more experiential learning in the program.

When I took a course titled Leadership and Spirituality, I expected an experiential component based on my assumption that spirituality is something to be *felt* and not just *taught*. While the content of the class was interesting, I was nevertheless disappointed in the lack of opportunities to explore our spirituality and engage with it as it related to leadership. While I felt that I had gained a lot of cognitive knowledge on leadership, I was still unsure of how to exercise and implement leadership in my life that felt authentic and true to myself. This research would be a good opportunity to bridge leadership theory with tangible tools for leadership practice and development. Aside from my general interest in the practical impacts of mindfulness on leadership, I also wanted to grow in my delivery and facilitation of mindfulness practices, especially to those new to the practice or just starting out, which this research would enable me to do. Thus, my research design was born.

To understand the benefits of mindfulness practices on leadership, I needed to gather participants who had an interest in leadership development. Using Heifitz and Linsky's (2009) definition of leadership as a reference, I deemed it was not necessary that my participants hold any kind of formal leadership role; rather, I wanted participants who were committed to furthering their understanding of themselves to become better leaders. I reached out to the School of Leadership and Education Sciences academic programs manager to send out a recruitment email (see Appendix A and Appendix B) to all graduate leadership students for research participation. After recruitment, I had four participants. Two were in the M.A. in Higher Education Leadership program with me, one was in the M.A. in Leadership Studies program, and one was pursuing a PhD in Leadership Studies. I had previous interactions with three of the four students; one student I had not met before. Notably, all four participants were female.

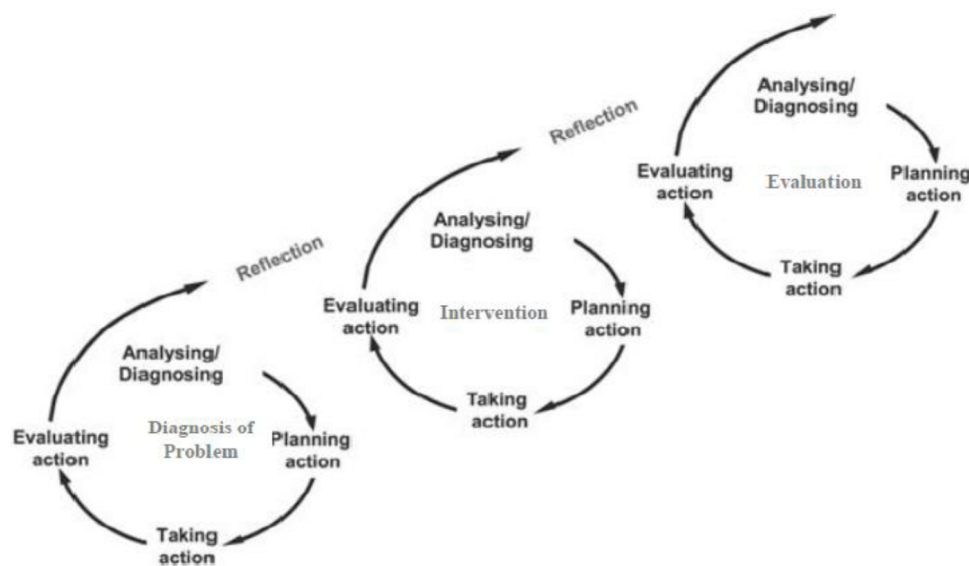
My critical friends group was the assigned groups created through similar topics of interest in my action research class to give feedback to each other throughout the research process. I relied heavily on their feedback and support, as I continuously bounced ideas off of them throughout my cycles. Knowing that they were going through similar processes and being able to share our triumphs and struggles with each other helped me to get through this research. I also leaned on classmates outside of this class who shared similar passions for exploring holistic wellbeing and self-care in non-Western ways, where I discussed my vision and confirmed the importance of this topic in leadership studies and the broader field of academe. Finally, I sought support from friends and healers who work as healing and spiritual practitioners to further particular understandings of energy healing, yoga, and spiritual concepts that would be important for this research. In this way, I drew expertise from both academic and spiritual fields in my attempts to bridge leadership and mindfulness.

Methodology

For my research, I used Coughlan and Brannick's (2005) action research methodology, as it allowed me to diagnose, plan and take action, and evaluate the impact of mindfulness practices on three leadership qualities (self-awareness, stress and anxiety regulation, and self-efficacy) through critical reflection at each stage. The first step of this action research cycle is diagnosing, which entails identifying what the issues are as a working theme to use as a basis of which action will be planned and taken throughout. Planning action follows the exploration of the context, purpose, and issue to construct a series of steps to implement in the taking action phase. Finally, evaluating action examines the outcomes of the action, both intended and unintended.

Figure 1

Coughlan and Brannick's (2005) Action Research Methodology



As seen in Figure 1, the first cycle involved diagnosing the nature of current struggles for leadership students at USD and identifying how the events of 2020 had impacted their leadership. The findings from the diagnosis step in Cycle 1, and literature-based concepts of mindfulness, informed the content of the three mindfulness practices delivered in the taking action step of Cycle 1, as well as served as the basis for Cycle 2 and 3. Cycle 4 consisted of a focus group to discuss the extent to which mindfulness-based interventions had contributed to the participants' leadership in the past month. Finally, Cycle 5 entailed a final evaluation of participants' thoughts on mindful leadership moving forward.

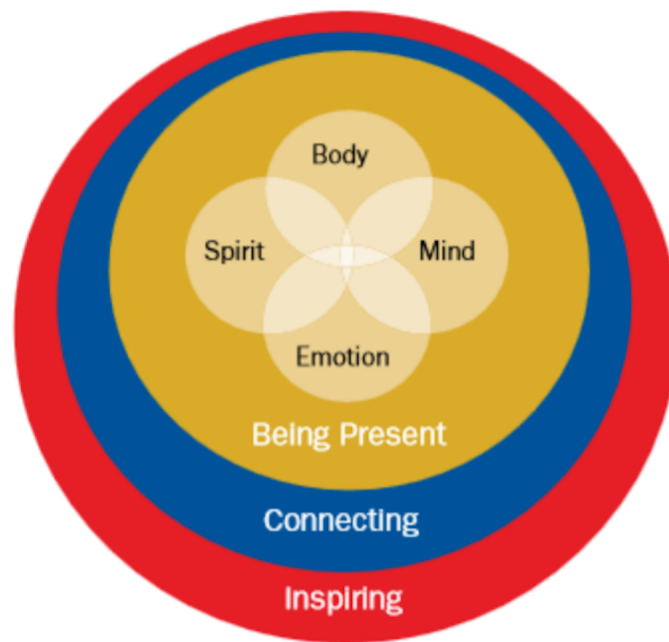
Over the course of five weeks from January 2021 to February 2021, I employed a mixed methods approach using qualitative and quantitative measures such as Likert-scales and text responses to questions related to mindfulness and leadership. Participants consisted of four students from the School of Leadership and Education Sciences, through which surveys, interviews, and observations were collected.

Cycles Overview

Each cycle was designed based on Elrich's (2015) mindful-leadership model. Elrich (2015) explained the core of the model is "connecting with yourself- with your spirit [i.e., purpose and values], emotion, mind and body. Once you can show up completely with all these aspects of yourself, you can connect with others... Once you have connected, you can lead and inspire" (p. 23).

Figure 2

Elrich's (2015) Mindful-Leadership Model



To mirror this model shown in Figure 2, I organized a mindful activity for each realm within the sphere of "Being Present." First, "Spirit" — breathwork to concentrate solely on the breath. Secondly, I organized an activity for the "Body"— yoga to restore the body to its optimum state of relaxation. Finally, I organized an activity for "Emotion" and "Mind"— guided meditation to notice thoughts without judgement and connect with the emotional body. To be mindful of participants' busy lives and not add more work to their busy schedules, these activities occurred

asynchronously through video format. In “Connecting,” I organized a synchronous discussion circle for participants to engage in dialogue and build community with each other as mindful leaders. I hypothesized that after experiencing the first and second spheres, participants would come to feel inspired again, which I would seek to find out through a post-summit survey.

Cycle One: Diagnosis and First Intervention

The purpose of the first cycle was two-fold: 1) to gather insight into the struggles and challenges that leadership students at USD were experiencing in the face of COVID-19, and 2) to implement the first intervention based on what I gathered. To first better understand my participants, I sent out the pre-summit online survey in the first week of January 2021 (see Appendix B). These questions asked about their current leadership struggles and their relationship to uncertainty that was brought on by the events of 2020. To measure levels of self-awareness, stress and anxiety, and self-efficacy, I utilized the mindful attention awareness scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003), Hamilton anxiety rating scale (HAM-A; Hamilton, 1959), and generalized self-efficacy scale (GSE; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), respectively. Finally, I asked participants to indicate their prior mindfulness experiences and extent to which they practiced mindfulness in their everyday lives so I could provide content appropriate to their level of experience.

Diagnosing

Based on the results of the pre-summit survey, I found that all four participants were not new to the practice of mindfulness. Some engaged in mindfulness at least once a month; others once a week, if not every day. I was glad to know that this was the case, as this meant I could delve deeper into more advanced themes within each intervention. When asked about the relationship between mindfulness and leadership, participants gave a variety of answers, most notably on the way mindfulness can create greater awareness internally (e.g., body, thoughts,

emotions) and externally (i.e., “take in more of the full context of what is occurring”). One student noted that mindfulness can also serve as a reminder for leaders to “live in a heartcentered way (meaning living in a way that aligns with your values, heart, and spirit),” which is reminiscent of authentic leadership theory, wherein authentic leaders’ have a deep sense of self and know where they stand on issues, values, and beliefs. Further, their espoused values and beliefs and their actions become aligned over time (Avolio, 2005).

When asked their reason for participating in this mindfulness summit, participants showed a desire to learn new ways of relaxing, develop their spiritual connection further, and actively engage in mindful leadership. Furthermore, Student D responded: “As someone that practices mindfulness and breathwork, I have found it integral to my effectiveness as a leader. However, I have not learned much about mindful leadership as a truly integrated practice. I wanted to participate to learn more and reflect further.” This reaffirmed my research design where I planned to provide space for participants to relax their mind and body, connect to themselves holistically, and reflect, both individually and collectively, on ways that mindfulness contributes to leadership.

As I had suspected, students seemed to be dealing with a sense of disconnect, lack of motivation, and self-doubt as direct results of the events of 2020 (primarily the impact of COVID-19 and racial injustice protests). Student A said, *“A leadership challenge I am experiencing is directly related to my leadership purpose, which is to help others achieve their academic dreams so that they can pursue further heartcentered lives. I am feeling increasingly disconnected from the students that I assist on a daily basis. Because I am now working remotely 100%, I have pretty much zero face to face interactions with students. This is normally what fuels me in my work. Because that connection is lacking, I have begun to doubt myself in the field of higher education, which I know is not necessarily a truthful doubt, but is an outcome of this*

feeling of disconnect. I am left feeling much less passionate about my work, and less fulfilled, which obviously has a trickle down effect into my everyday life (even outside of the 9-5 hours)."

Student B also commented on self-doubt and loss of motivation: *"It has been very difficult for me to stay focused and motivated on work and school related duties while also dealing with mental health struggles and our current situation we face here in America (politics, racial injustice, pandemic, etc)... my anxiety being heightened due to the fear of COVID, frustration and fear of the current political climate, etc. All of these factors led to a decrease in motivation and feelings of hopelessness and fear of what is next to come. This impacted my work in the center for health and wellness promotion and I felt like I was not doing enough."* Student C's response shared a similar notion: *"I find myself projecting the "worst case scenario" or posing the "what if?" questions that keep me from taking actions I know would move me forward. This spirals into self-doubt in my own abilities and skills and that distracts me from being motivated to continue doing what I know I need to do. I notice my fear takes away from my generally positive attitude and slows me down in making progress."*

When these themes emerged, the task of this summit was clear: to provide opportunities for participants to release tension in their bodies and relax their minds to make possible a different way of being.

Planning Action

For my first intervention, I wanted to begin with a simple, yet powerful mindful exercise, so I chose breathwork, or mindful breathing. A growing number of studies, such as one by Ma et. al. (2017) have revealed that deep breathing, particularly through the diaphragm, triggers body relaxation responses and has positive impacts on cognition, affect, and responses to stress. I wanted participants to experience this as the first exercise, so that they could see how much stress and anxiety they carry in their bodies daily, and how simple it is to release such tension

through mindful breathing. To take this mindfulness practice a step further, I also decided to ask participants to engage in a visualization activity immediately after. Visualization is powerful because it allows people to use their minds actively to imagine their desires and full potential. Research shows that the brain is incapable of distinguishing between real from imaginary; doing something and visualizing doing the same thing activates the same brain activity (Hamilton, 2014). According to Dispenza (2013), “new thoughts that lead to new behaviors and experiences begin to change the human biology, including the brain itself... when you change, everything changes around you” (p. 23). In other words, by creating a vision of the ideal self, one can come to embody the ideal self over time. As many participants commented on their struggle with self-doubt and lack of confidence, I thought incorporating an exercise where they could visualize their most confident self would be powerful.

Taking Action

In the second week of January 2021, I emailed out the breathwork video and post-breathwork survey. Participants were asked to fill out the survey immediately following the exercise; they were given a week to complete the whole activity. The breathwork video was a 20-minute video titled “Powerful Ancient Breathwork” by Breathe and Flow Yoga that I obtained from YouTube. I had come across this video a few months ago and had been blissfully amazed at how euphoric and clear-minded I felt afterwards. I knew that this was a profound experience that I wanted to share with others.

As a follow-up practice to the breathwork video, I also invited participants to engage in a visualization exercise where they would imagine the most empowered version of themselves. What would their life look like? How would they feel? Participants were asked to visualize, as detailed as possible, their ideal vision of themselves.

Evaluating Action

The post-breathwork survey (see Appendix C) employed an adapted version of the State Mindfulness Scale (SMS; Tanay & Bernstein, 2013), which measures objects of mindfulness (i.e., physical and mental events) and the qualities of mindfulness (e.g., attention, awareness, openness) of a specific experience. Table 1 shows the number of responses to Likert-scale questions from the SMS.

Table 1

Post-breathwork Survey Results

Questions	Results
I felt aware of what was happening inside of me.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I clearly physically felt what was going on in my body.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I felt that I was experiencing the present moment fully.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I noticed physical sensations come and go.	4 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I felt in contact with my body.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I was aware of what was going on in my mind.	4 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well

These results indicate that most, if not all participants, became aware of and stayed engaged with the body and mind through breathwork. Reflections on this practice also confirm the findings:

“Mind and body connection was strong in this exercise! I loved the physical sensation and mental clarity it provided. I stayed present during the breathing and allowed my mind chatter to

drift away quickly when something would come up.” “I feel incredible, alive, and present after doing this. Focused and in touch with my body, mind and spirit.”

Reflection

Results from the first intervention alone showed promising data into the experiences of mindfulness, which gave me confidence in my research design. While I knew from personal experience that mindfulness could provide such awareness and mental clarity, hearing it from others was a new and welcomed experience. One of the things I longed for in developing this action research was being able to connect with others through the experience of mindfulness. My mindfulness practice was mostly conducted in the confines of my own home; even during group classes like yoga, there was never structured time to share out the experiences or insights we had had with each other. Therefore, while I personally knew what mindfulness looked and felt like for me, I was curious to hear the experiences of others and connect through shared experiences. Reading the survey results gave me exactly the sort of connection I was longing for. With each reflection that shared with me their excitement, discovery or insight during and after this mindfulness practice, I too felt excited. I felt excited because I knew the experiences they had had and I could feel their excitement. And, I felt excited because I could see the larger impact of mindfulness on their lives. With a renewed sense of confidence and purpose, I moved onto the second cycle.

Cycle Two: Second Intervention

The purpose of the second cycle was to implement the second mindfulness intervention, which was yoga. This cycle was conducted the week following Cycle 1. Once again, participants were emailed a video and survey to complete on their own time within one week.

Analysing

Based on the findings from Cycle 1 in which I diagnosed the current challenges of my participants and implemented the first mindfulness intervention, I knew they needed to further release tension and stress in their bodies. By relaxing the body and allowing the body to restore and heal itself, I hypothesized that some of the negative thought patterns they had had over the past month, such as *“I have begun to doubt myself in the field of higher education”* and *“I find myself projecting the ‘worst case scenario’ or posing the “what if?” questions that keep me from taking actions I know would move me forward,”* could give way to thoughts that are more empowering.

Planning Action

To create the intervention, I immediately thought of my friend and yoga practitioner Rebeca Camacho as the perfect fit to create and lead a yoga practice. She had recently started her spiritual business that incorporates yoga, reiki, and meditation and I wanted to give her a platform to share her knowledge and wisdom with others. Knowing her, I knew that she would be thrilled to create for and contribute to my research in this way. I reached out to her and set up a meeting, in which I explained my research on mindful leadership and interventions that could contribute to the development of such leadership practice. I also shared with her some of the themes that had emerged in the pre-survey that I wanted her to address, such as relaxing and connecting to the body, quieting the mind, and practicing focused awareness. She suggested that a 40-minute yoga flow would be appropriate to incorporate all of those components, and I encouraged her to add anything else she felt called to share. Since this summit was a remote experience, we decided that the yoga flow would be recorded and edited on her end, and then emailed to me so that I could email it out to the participants. Once the video was finished, I did a run-through of the video to check the content and flow of the video.

Taking Action

The week following Cycle 1, I emailed out the yoga flow video that Rebeca put together and a post-yoga survey using Qualtrics. Similar to the design of the first intervention, participants were given a week to complete the activity and asked that the survey be filled out immediately after the mindful exercise.

In the yoga flow, Rebeca began by sharing that the word “yoga” in ancient sanskrit means “egg yolk” to show the union between mind, body, heart and spirit. She invited participants to set an intention of cultivating a deeper sense of awareness and connecting to the self in all areas of life. She stressed the importance of “noticing the breath going in and out and suspending all judgement throughout the practice,” which is one of the core practices of mindfulness. In the next sequence, she invited a pose that opens the throat chakra, which is an energy center in the throat for “better communication, greater expression... to disseminate information in a way that is true and feels authentic to us.” In viparita virabhadrasana, known as Warrior I, both hands were lifted up to the ceiling while one of the legs was bent at the front at a 90 degree angle (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Viparita Virabhadrasana, (Warrior I Pose, 2021)



A pose rich in symbolism, Rebeca shared, “We anchor in light, that we are warriors of light and seekers of truth. Truth that is guided and illuminated by all that is light.” Vrksasana, or tree pose, was a slightly more challenging pose that required standing on and supporting the rest of the body with one leg (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

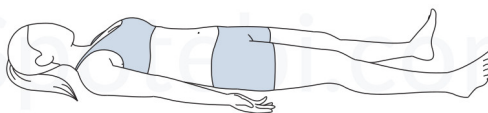
Vrksasana, (Tree Pose, 2021)



She shared words of encouragement by saying, “If you fall, you can get right back into it. There’s no rush; it’s all about the journey. The tree is a symbolism of your own life, allowing yourself to be open to new possibilities.” Finally, the yoga sequence ended with savasana, also known as corpse pose (see Figure 5) where the back is on the floor and arms are to the side, for “a final moment of relaxation, to let go and surrender to this feeling and to just be.”

Figure 5

Savasana, (Corpse Pose, 2021)



Evaluating Action

The post-yoga survey also employed the same SMS scale from Cycle 1. Table 2 shows the number of responses to Likert-scale questions from the SMS.

Table 2

Post-yoga Survey Results

Questions	Results
I felt aware of what was happening inside of me.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I clearly physically felt what was going on in my body.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I felt that I was experiencing the present moment fully.	1 out of 4 participants responded extremely well
I noticed physical sensations come and go.	4 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I felt in contact with my body.	2 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well
I was aware of what was going on in my mind.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well or extremely well

Overall, the yoga practice saw a decrease in state mindfulness as compared to the breathwork practice. Most notably, only one participant responded extremely well to “I felt that I was experiencing the present moment fully” and two participants responded very well or extremely well to “I felt in contact with my body.” Student A shared her reason for not being able to experience the present moment: *“This practice brought attention to the more critical voice or ego in my head that speaks loudly at times. I was in self-judgment and judgment of external things as well (I.e. the video, instructor, my yoga setup, etc). This judgement was slowing me down and not allowing me to fully experience the moment.”* Despite this, she also shared that “I

also experienced moments of feeling proud of myself and feeling good in my body. These were shorter moments unfortunately. My motivation now is to return to a balanced yoga practice so that flowing through these emotions and thoughts happens more smoothly and effortlessly. I have confidence I can build that habit again and use yoga as a practice to support it.” Another student reflected on her experience of not being able to be more present: *“I felt distracted and found it hard to stay in the moment. Anxious thoughts came up. Random memories came up. I realized that yoga may not be for me in terms of mindfulness; I think I get so caught up in what my body can and cannot do that I find it hard to stay in the present moment.”* Student C took it in a different direction, where she explained her take on the connection between mindfulness and leadership: *“What I always appreciate the most about mind/body/spirit connection activities such as yoga are the lessons I learn or am reminded of throughout the session. For example, “practice as medicine”, “honor the limitations of our bodies”, and “when we are connected to our body everything else in our life flows more freely” are all “yoga” lessons that I think are important to leadership. Many parallels can be made. For example, when I am living my leadership purpose, everything in my life will flow more freely (this directly ties to the last quote I noted). Practicing body mindfulness is always a reminder to live in the moment, and if the mind or even body wanders, have self-compassion and love for yourself to kindly bring yourself back to the now. Mindful activities always serve as a healthy “reset” button for me, and pulls me out of every day feeling the same/unimportant (which is tied to my leadership challenge).”*

Reflections

Similar to the state-mindfulness results from Cycle 2, Cycle 3 also showed promising results. While four out of six questions had 75% of participants responding very well or extremely well to connecting to the body and mind, two questions came out with fairly low values. I was especially surprised to see the statement that asked, “I felt in contact with my

body,” have a low value on the Likert scale, as I hypothesized that yoga in particular would promote deeper connection to the body as compared to other mindfulness practices. Interestingly, I too had a challenging time connecting to my body and mind through this particular yoga flow. Personally, yoga requires too many movements for me to be able to connect with my body and mind deeply. I become hyper-focused on following the instructor’s directions to do the correct poses and transition from one pose to another, hindering me from connecting to myself. As I try to move my body to follow different poses, the mental chatter is loud. I know from experience that yoga is not my choice of mindfulness practice to feel fully connected to myself; I much prefer connecting to myself through non-movement.

Seeing that the statement “*I felt that I was experiencing the moment fully*,” had the lowest score out of all the statements, I wondered if perhaps there was a correlation between participants feeling like they were unable to connect to their body and feeling disconnected from the present moment, as Student A shared that this practice brought on a critical voice in her head, while Student B shared that she felt distracted and anxious thoughts came up. While this low score appeared to be discouraging in my research to examine yoga as a mindfulness practice to enhance self-awareness, I realized that the data pointed to something different. A deeper analysis revealed that participants were in fact engaged in self-awareness. Student A may have correlated having a critical voice in her head and making judgements about herself and external factors as not being in the present moment, but it is precisely this act of *noticing* the thoughts that is the practice of being self-aware. While we can conclude from the state-mindfulness results that yoga does enhance mindfulness, especially as it relates to noticing physical sensations and mental thought processes, and thus self-awareness, it also gives insight to the fact that not all mindfulness practices work for everyone and some may find deeper states of mindfulness with one form of practice over another. Thus, in thinking about incorporating mindfulness practices

into leadership development, this served as a learning opportunity for me to provide several mindfulness tools to participants, so that they can experience and decide for themselves what works.

Cycle Three: Third Intervention

A week after Cycle 2, the third cycle was conducted. In this intervention, participants were sent a 20-minute guided meditation video to complete and survey to fill out afterwards within one week. The purpose of this cycle was to implement the third mindfulness intervention and continue to gain further insight into the impact of mindfulness practices on my participants.

Analysing

The data from the two previous cycles had proven that common mindfulness practices like breathwork and yoga are effective at enhancing state-mindfulness, just as literature claims. As Cycle 1 was aimed at connecting to the spirit (i.e. inner purpose and values) and Cycle 2 was aimed at connecting to the body, this third and final intervention was aimed at connecting to the mind and emotions.

Planning Action

For my third and final intervention, I decided to create a meditation that would incorporate elements of body relaxation, visualization, and affirmations using my experience as a meditation facilitator. Personally, I have been practicing meditation for years; it has helped me to release stress and tension and create a deeper connection to my inner light in the most challenging times of my life, as well as in the stressful moments of everyday life. Especially since the start of lockdown due to the spread of COVID-19, I leaned heavily on my mindfulness practices to get me through a time filled with uncertainty. With a combination of my personal and professional experiences, I was confident in my abilities to deliver a powerful meditation around the specific themes of releasing stress and anxiety and reconnecting with the inner self

for a renewed sense of confidence. I also decided to incorporate other healing modalities I have learned and practiced over the years, such as reiki (energy healing) and neuro-linguistic programming (psychological approach using the language of the mind to reach a personal goal) into this meditation to provide as much healing as possible.

Taking Action

The week following Cycle 2, I emailed out the meditation video and a post-meditation survey. Once again, participants were asked to complete the activity in one week, with the survey filled out and submitted immediately after the mindful exercise. Figure 6 outlines the meditation flow and summarizes each exercise.

Figure 6

Meditation Flow

Exercise 1: Deep Breathing

Once you find a comfortable position, gently close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose and feel the air fill up your diaphragm. Feel your belly extend outwards and at the top of your breath, hold it for a second and notice the space and then exhale out through your mouth completely. And feel your stomach and your diaphragm deflate. And at the bottom of the breath once again, hold your breath and notice the space on your own. Feel the tension and anxiety release from your body.

Breathe in peace. Breathe out stress.
 Breath in trust. Breathe out judgement.
 Breathe in courage. Breathe out fear.
 Breathe in gratitude. Breathe out tension.
 Breathe in love.

- What is the most prominent feeling in your body at this moment?
- Are there any thoughts that are running through your mind at the moment?

Simply become aware of those thoughts. There is no need to judge or criticize. Just notice and release. Thoughts are like clouds on a clear sky- they come and go. When you notice that your mind starts to wander, take a deep breath and bring your awareness back to your breath. Your breath is the anchor to the present moment.

Exercise 2: Step Into New You Visualization

Adapted from Integrated Healing's "Step Into New You"

First, imagine yourself standing in front of you. Notice this person- facial expression, posture, clothes, etc. Now, imagine the most confident, empowered version of yourself standing before you, facing you.

- What does he/she look like?
- How is his/her posture?
- What is his/her facial expression?
- What is he/she wearing?
- What is he/she doing?
- How does she behave?
- How does she talk? ...etc.

Then, turn the person around so you are looking at his/her back. Even with the back turned, you notice the confidence and power emanating. With your mind's eye, take a step forward into this person in front of you and merge yourself with this person. Feel yourself become one. You are standing as this person who is empowered, confident, trusting. Take a moment to visualize yourself as this new person.

Exercise 3: Affirmations

Repeat, either out loud or in your head:

- I am capable.
- I am worthy of all of my desires and wants.
- I have everything I need within me.
- I am infinite potential.
- I trust in myself.
- I am a powerful creator of my reality.
- I believe in my power to make any vision come to life.
- I give myself permission to unleash my potential.
- I am Love and Light.
- I am worthy because I exist.
- I love myself and accept myself unconditionally.
- I choose to honor and respect myself.
- I am enough as I am.

I first began the meditation with an exercise to relax the body and release tension through deep breathing. Knowing that it is easy to lose focus on the present moment easily, I encouraged participants by saying, "Every time you get lost in your thoughts, bring your attention back to the breath. Your breath is your anchor to the present moment. And it will ground you and keep you centered." Once I felt that I had provided enough space for relaxation, I moved onto the next phase of the meditation, which was a breathing exercise using concepts of qigong that I had learned through my reiki apprenticeship. In qigong, there is an energy center called the dantian,

located a few inches above the navel, which is considered a source of inner strength and confidence (Holden, 2021). People who are connected to their center will not only have more physical vitality and emotional stability but also self-efficacy to take action and exercise leadership in all parts of life. As I had found in my diagnosis that my participants were struggling with self-confidence, this exercise was important to incorporate. For participants to connect to this energy center, I invited them to “imagine a yellow light that starts at the dantian and grows bigger with each breath... A powerful, confident light inside of you energizes each and every cell in your body.”

Next, I utilized an adapted version of “Step into new you” visualization, once of the healing protocols of Integrated Healing. Integrated Healing is a healing system that combines neuro-linguistic programming, applied kinesiology, modern psychology, and many other modalities (Integrated Healing, 2021). In this visualization, I guided participants to see, with the mind’s eye, the most confident, empowered version of themselves standing before them, through guided questions like, “What does she look like? What is her posture? What is her facial expression? What is she wearing? How does she talk as someone who believes in her skills, her abilities, her inner power?” Once that image became clear in their minds, they stepped forward and merged with the image, becoming one with the image of themselves as confident, empowered leaders. “Step into new you” is a powerful exercise because it utilizes kinesthetic imagery, integrating bodily movements and muscle sensations with mental pictures. This utilizes the mind-body connection for deeper healing and profound changes.

Finally, I closed the meditation with affirmations. With repeated practice, affirmations can reprogram the negative or harmful thinking patterns to positive ones so that we begin to think- and act- differently. Considering that the participants were facing challenges with self-doubt, fear, and anxiety, I deemed that it was important to remind them of their worth,

capabilities, and inner power. Here are the affirmations I chose: “I am capable. I am worthy of all of my desires and wants. I have everything I need within me. I am infinite potential. I trust in myself. I am a powerful creator of my reality. I believe in my power to make any vision come to life. I give myself permission to unleash my potential. I am love and light. I am worthy because I exist. I love myself and accept myself unconditionally. I choose to honor and respect myself. I am enough as I am.” With each phrase, I encouraged participants to not only recite, but also feel each word in their body for a more powerful experience.

Evaluating Action

The same SMS scale from Cycle 1 and 2 were utilized once again for this cycle. Table 3 shows the number of responses to Likert-scale questions from the SMS.

Table 3

Post-meditation Survey Results

Questions	Results
I felt aware of what was happening inside of me.	4 out of 4 participants responded very well
I clearly physically felt what was going on in my body.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well
I felt that I was experiencing the present moment fully.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well
I noticed physical sensations come and go.	4 out of 4 participants responded very well
I felt in contact with my body.	3 out of 4 participants responded very well
I was aware of what was going on in my mind.	4 out of 4 participants responded very well

These results confirm the existing literature that meditation does indeed invoke state mindfulness of the mind and body in participants. For Student A, she found that the meditation practice

helped to calm her body and navigate intrusive thoughts: *“I think this practice is a great way to pause during uncertain or stressful times. For me, my anxiety manifests itself as intrusive thoughts and I have difficulty calming myself down when the thoughts become overwhelming and consuming. This meditation practice helped calm my thoughts and my body down to a baseline where I was more in touch with what I was thinking and feeling. This will also help me exercise leadership during uncertain times because it is a reminder to stay in the present and aware of what you are in control of and letting go of fear. I want to continue meditating and taking this time for pause in order to sustain myself through my leadership work.”* Similar to Student A, Student B felt that she was better able to first become aware of, and then manage intrusive thoughts: *“This practice could really help ground and center myself. Post meditation I felt able to take in more information without my emotions or intrusive thoughts get in the way of making decisions.”* Student C not only experienced the mind/body connection through this meditation but also the mindfulness/leadership connection: *“This combination of breath, body awareness and relaxation, light visualization, future self visualization, affirmations, etc. was incredibly calming, loving, and then empowering. I can see this being a regular part of my meditation practice that deepens the mind/body connection primarily. I believe this connection will allow me a deeper sense of trust in my intuition. My body speaks but often I do not listen. This was a powerful meditation to allow me to relax as well as deliberately connect to my body, its sensations, and use my mind and breath to sense the flow of energy that makes such an impact of how I experience each moment. With greater trust in my ability to calm my body and activate my mind in an empowering way, I have greater trust and confidence in handling my leadership challenges.”*

Reflections

The results from Cycle 3 once again proved the effectiveness of mindfulness practice, this time in the form of meditation, to enhance self-awareness. Even more so than yoga, meditation seemed to be effective at promoting a deeper connection to the body and mind. One thing that stood out to me throughout this research was the invasive nature of thoughts, particularly harmful, negative thoughts. Especially during uncertain, stressful times, the body kicks into “fight-or-flight” mode, which takes away the ability for complex decision-making, as well as open-mindedness to entertain multiple perspectives. As attention narrows, people tend to latch onto a narrative that is most familiar, although not necessarily the most empowering. Goleman (1995), who introduced the idea of emotional intelligence, called this “emotional hijacking.” Participants seemed to all mention, at one point or another, the experience of emotional hijacking, that led them to feel anxious, insecure, or dubious, particularly in their roles at work. However, mindfulness seemed to control the emotional hijacking and put thoughts of fear, unworthiness, and uncertainty on hold to open up states of curiosity and self-observation. Heifetz and Linsky (2009) said that adaptive leaders are those with a diagnostic mindset about themselves and the situation. Meaning, that they are able to observe their experience, rather than get caught up in the experience itself. With this comes the power of being able to entertain multiple perspectives and possibilities, which could contribute to calm, authentic, decision-making. The practice of mindfulness through meditation indeed allowed participants to practice adaptive leadership by encouraging a diagnostic mindset and *“take in more information without [my] emotions or intrusive thoughts get[ting] in the way of making decisions.”*

Another theme that emerged was that of self-efficacy. By connecting deeper to their minds and bodies, participants found a deeper sense of trust developing within themselves. This could be due to the fact that participants began to recognize just how much control they have

over their bodies and responses. Through experiencing the benefits of mindfulness, participants were now equipped with the tools to regulate their stress and/or anxiety and calm themselves down. This was incredible to hear, as one of the competencies I sought to measure in this research was self-efficacy, the belief in themselves as leaders. The data I gathered from the reflections in this cycle confirmed that mindfulness practice can indeed enhance self-efficacy, as one comes to learn themselves through mind, body, and spirit.

Finally, as a meditation facilitator who wrote the meditation script and recorded myself leading the meditation, I was very pleased to read everyone's positive insights and profound experiences/realizations they had through this experience. It was my desire to create a space for my participants to return to the core of their being and remember the self-leader that is within each of them, so I felt I was able to accomplish my intention. I was also inspired to read that participants were willing to continue practicing meditation to sustain themselves through their leadership work, as my purpose in sharing mindfulness practices with others is to incite more curiosity and interest in connecting with the self holistically.

Cycle Four: Focus Group

The fourth cycle took place in the second week of February 2021 to gather all of the participants for a focus group regarding their experiences of the mindfulness practices. I sent an online survey to find a time when everyone could be present. Luckily, we were able to organize a date that worked for all participants, and I asked them to block off 45-minute for this gathering.

Analysing

Based on the results from the previous three surveys on state-mindfulness and responses to the open-ended questions, I knew that participants had lots more to share, especially as it related to mindfulness and leadership. I hypothesized that the focus group could not only allow participants to engage in a conversation with like-minded individuals who had just gone through

the same activities to share experiences and learn from each other but also make way for emerging concepts and ideas through exchanging ideas.

Planning Action

Planning for this focus group was quite simple. I wanted to further understand each participants' experience with regards to each mindfulness activity and gather their overall insight into mindfulness and leadership, so I created broad questions regarding those topics (see Appendix F). I kept my questions to a minimum to leave room for everyone to be able to share their thoughts in a free-flowing manner and allow for emerging ideas to be exchanged with one another, all within the time boundary of 45 minutes.

Taking Action

On February 12th, 2021 at 4 pm PST, all four participants and myself gathered together on Zoom for a 45-minute focus group. Consistent with the mindful theme, I opened up the focus group with a box breathing exercise, which consisted of a 4-count inhale, 7-count hold, 8-count exhale, where we repeated this cycle three times. I figured that my participants were coming to this space right after work or some other task. Especially now that everyone is working remotely, the boundaries become blurred easily and one task bleeds into the next, dragging past thoughts and emotions into the present space; a mindful breathing exercise can encourage participants to become present to whatever is happening at the time. We moved on to introductions, where I asked participants to share their name, program, and check-in word. Check-in word is a useful practice that I have picked up to 1) gauge the audience as a facilitator and 2) honor the presence of each participant. Then, I asked the questions following the focus group script.

Evaluating Action

The first question asked participants to share a check-in word of how they were feeling. Many chose to share out more than one word; most common responses were gratitude,

excitement, feeling welcomed, and aligned. Student A who mentioned aligned, said, *“This is one of the many things that is aligned with who I want to be, where I want to go. It’s exactly this group. And this research, this work that we’re doing is definitely aligned with me and my values.”*

The second question asked participants what drew them to this research on mindful leadership. Student A, who has years of mindfulness experience and a few healing art certifications herself, shared, *“Mindfulness has played a huge role in my personal development and in my leadership development in my spiritual journey... I was excited to see what you [Ayumi] were going to put out there, what you were gonna have us learn about and go through and ask us about.”* Student B shared that she was intrigued with the concept of mindfulness and leadership, as those two things are rarely associated with one another. She said, *“It’s something that we may inherently believe should be attributed to leadership... like practice of self-awareness, breathwork, meditation, but they’re not commonly spoken of, it’s something that’s very implied almost in a hushed way... I just think that more attention can be drawn to the association of these concepts.”* Student C shared a similar notion: *“I think very few people are doing this work. So it’s extra exciting in that way.”* Student D shared her interest in the holistic approach to leadership: *“I was captured by the full, whole person, whole mind, body, spirit, kind of approach to leadership and mindfulness in leadership... it’s something I’ve been striving to improve on for a while... I also thought this would be a great way to hold myself accountable to help contribute to our knowledge base and help other leaders.”*

The next question asked participants about their overall experience and their take-aways. For Student B, she shared how initially she felt intimidated by mindfulness practice, especially in the presence of others. She mentioned that being able to practice asynchronously through videos allowed her to feel less self-conscious and engage with the content from the safety of her own

room. Student C noted that she appreciated the variety of practices: *“It was a reminder to me that different things work for different people and at different moments.”* Then, she said, *“I would say the outcomes that I was most aware of was the immediate impact of clarity of thinking that would happen afterwards. I would start normally in a highly anxious space, filled with a lot of anxiety... afterwards, I just would feel more in control... more present to things not being as scary... more equipped to fulfill my responsibilities in my office or with my coworkers. It made life immediately... much more accessible to me in a place that was less fearful.”* Student D shared her similar experience with clarity of thoughts, and further expanded, *“I felt like I was able to take in more information and make more sound decisions, because I think I was able to be more present to what was in the moment, like what was existing and what could be and what was emerging. I felt like I was able to process a lot more information more succinctly and that information was more readily available. I remember having a handful of days after doing each of the exercises, where I thought, ‘Oh, this is significantly different than the days that I don’t breathe, like I don’t meditate,’ and so I thought that was very tangible in my leadership, communication, decision making.”*

To the question “What are the benefits of being present?” participants shared a variety of responses. Student C said the biggest benefit to being present was being able to navigate difficult conversations: *“No one wants to go into a challenging situation with the energy of a confrontation... If you don’t have a healthy mechanism of how to navigate those situations, you typically will either avoid them or confront them in a way that may not be necessarily the most healthy way to navigate the conversation... When we have these practices as part of our toolbelt, and when we practice them on a consistent basis, it’s about coming back to a place of being grounded and being able to be an observer of our thoughts and feelings... it’s really about taking that spot of a disassociated person from the emotional state and being a conscious*

communicator.” Student B likened the experience of being present to a ‘reset’ button of getting back to herself: “I get hung up on a single narrative, and I realized after this mindfulness project... I have more of a capacity to look at something from a variety of perspectives. When I am more centered and grounded, I am able to more objectively and truthfully examine the situation in a way that is kinder to myself, kinder to others. It’s like I feel more like myself... When you get down to who you are truly, accurately, that’s where true leadership is born... those are the best leaders, when they’re aligned with that purpose.” Student A agreed with the way being present allowed her to be kinder to herself: “When I was doing all these activities, I was more able to feel or realize my own needs. Usually, I’m so focused on what everyone else needs and helping everybody else... I forget to take care of my own basic needs, or forget to even take the time to check in with myself... which has helped me set boundaries, especially in the workplace... in my professional career and in leadership, this is more sustainable.” She also added to the conversation regarding open-mindedness in this way: “When I’m centered or grounded, I feel more open to what is and I don’t have as many defenses come up to prevent me from seeing things as they are... I’ve also noticed an increase in curiosity... and see how things are interconnected. Both individuals, systems, groups, I see the connectivity at a higher level.”

Finally, Student D shared that her philosophy is to take care of herself first before taking care of others, and her intention going into her master’s program was to develop self-leadership as a way to set an example for others: *“Before you go out and expect from others or encourage others through it or empower others through the journey, I want to be able to have gone through that journey myself so that I can come from a place of authentically sharing what happened/happens with me... I have stepped into leadership in that way, because I’ve done it for myself in my life. It’s a super empowering place to be.”*

The final question asked participants to finish the statement, “After participating in this, one thing that is beginning to be clear for me is...” Responses included consistency and accountability, the need to take this practice beyond an individual practice and infuse it in spheres of influence, normalizing mindfulness practices, and the optimism of the possibility of managing anxiety naturally with a sustained mindfulness practice.

Reflections

A recurring theme during the focus group was the topic of accountability. While many participants recognized the benefits of mindfulness theoretically, they found it difficult at times to sustain their practice. It seemed that especially during stressful times, when mindfulness practice could benefit them the most, their practice would become second priority. Even for myself, I can attest that during times that I most need mindfulness practice, I tend to put it off because I feel I do not have enough time to make myself practice mindfulness. Accountability, whether it is for class, with a coach, or with like-minded friends, helps me to get back on track and stay on track. Participants had mentioned in the initial survey in Cycle 1 that they looked forward to weekly mindfulness activities to get them back into the routine; by the end of five weeks, participants felt that the accountability helped them to stay consistent to the practice and see tangible benefits to a sustained mindfulness practice, in work and in their personal lives. Perhaps an added benefit of integrating mindfulness practices into leadership development curriculum directly would be for those who need accountability to keep a sustained practice.

Personally, I felt complete in alignment with my purpose and passion of bridging mindfulness and leadership throughout the discussion in the focus group. I felt incredibly proud of having organized and conducted this research that was so closely aligned to my soul’s purpose. I felt immense gratitude for my participants for showing interest in this work and dedicating time and energy to sharing this experience with me. And, I felt inspired to continue

creating mindful spaces in leadership development, having confirmed through the focus group that there was indeed deep correlation and great promise to integrating mindfulness practice in leadership development. Just like in Elrich's (2015) mindful-leadership model, I found myself getting to a point of inspiration after connecting to myself and others through this research.

Throughout my time in this program, I struggled with showing up authentically and having others see me as I am. There were parts of me that felt my spiritual self and healing practitioner identity was not welcome in the field of leadership studies. Initially, I tried to conceal parts of myself that wanted to bring a more holistic approach to leadership that addressed the body, mind and soul. The more I hid that part of myself, the more disconnected I felt and found myself struggling to find confidence, passion, and motivation in the program. Through the different courses I took, I gradually found confidence, little by little, to share my thoughts and opinions to approach leadership from a holistic perspective. Three out of four participants have been with me since the beginning of my master's program, and they have seen me struggle and then come to embrace my identity as both a leadership student and healing practitioner. When I asked the participants why they wanted to be part of this research, they responded that they wanted to not only explore mindfulness practices in the context of leadership development but also support me in my journey. This made me feel seen and valued in my purpose, values, and intentions. Even in times when I had forgotten who I am or what my purpose was, others saw who I was and affirmed my presence and what I stood for. To me, this was the true power and value of having a community. My peers encouraged me to be more authentic, and have supported me along my journey. While I curated this research to encourage and foster authentic leadership in my participants, in the end, I realized this research was for my own growth as an authentic leader. I was reminded of a South African proverb, Ubuntu, which means "I am, because you are." It speaks to the fact that we are all interconnected; there is a

oneness to humanity, and we ourselves grow and progress through the growth and progress of others.

Cycle Five: Evaluation

The fifth and final cycle took place between February to March 2021, where I sent out a post-summit survey (see Appendix G) to evaluate the overall impact of the summit on participants.

Analysing

This cycle served primarily to bring the question posed at the beginning of this research, which is “How can mindfulness practices impact self-awareness, stress and anxiety, and self-efficacy?” While I was able to make inferential connections between mindfulness and the three leadership competencies through data from the previous cycles, this cycle would show the impact of mindfulness on three leadership competencies quantitatively, making this research much more convincing.

Planning Action

In the post-summit survey, I utilized the same scales used in the pre-summit survey (i.e., MAAS, HAM-A, and GSE) so that I could measure pre-post values on self-awareness, stress and anxiety regulation, and self-efficacy. In addition, I included an adapted version of the Prochaska and DiClemente (1983) States of Change Questionnaire. Originally created to determine the degree to which smokers are in the process of quitting, the questionnaire asked smokers to select one of five statements which varied in degree of self-change. In my study, participants were asked to choose from the lowest stage of change of “I am not thinking about adding a mindful practice into my routine within the next six months” to the highest stage of change of “I have a routine mindfulness practice and I am working to maintain it” to measure the degree to which they were looking to adopt mindfulness practices into their routine moving forward. Finally, I asked

participants about the relevance of the summit content to their leadership development, job, and studies at USD to gauge their thoughts on whether this summit was useful to them.

Taking Action

Immediately following the focus group in Cycle 4, I sent out the post-summit survey for participants to complete. All participants submitted their results to me within the week, and my research concluded.

Evaluating Action

Table 4a-4c indicate the pre-post values of self-awareness, stress and anxiety regulation, and self-efficacy, respectively. Scoring took the mean of the items indicated in the table.

Table 4a

Self-awareness survey results

	Pre-Summit	Post-Summit
I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present.	2	2.25
I tend to NOT notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.	1.75	2
It seems as if I am "running on automatic," without much awareness of what I'm doing.	2.75	3.75
I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.	2.75	3.75
I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.	3	3.5
I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.	1.25	2
I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I'm doing right now to get there.	2	3
Total:	2.21	2.89

Note. Scale: 0 = almost always, 5= almost never

Survey results indicate that self-awareness increased in all measurements, some more significantly than others. Namely, “running on automatic,” rushing through activities without being attentive to them, and losing touch with the present due to being so focused on the goal saw a one-point increase on the scale.

Table 4b

Stress and anxiety regulation survey results

	Pre-Summit	Post-Summit
Anxious mood (worries, anticipation of the worst, fearful anticipation, irritability, etc.)	2	1.5
Tension (feelings of tension, inability to relax, restlessness, fatigability, tightness, etc.)	1.5	1
Fears (of communication, of inadequacy, of failure, of criticism, of responsibility, etc.)	1.75	1
Depressed mood (loss of interest, lack of pleasure, hopelessness, sadness, emptiness, self-blame, etc.)	1	1
Somatic symptoms (tightness in chest, choking feelings, upset stomach or digestive issues, headache, fatigue, pounding heart, etc.)	1.25	.75
Total:	1.5	1.05

Note. Scale: 0 = not present, 4 = very severe

Overall, stress and anxiety regulation saw a decrease in all but one measurements; depressed moods stayed the same pre- and post- summit at a scale of “slightly present.”

Table 4c*Self-efficacy survey results*

	Pre-Summit	Post-Summit
It is easy for me to stick to my aims.	2.25	2
It is easy for me to accomplish my goals.	2	2
I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.	1.5	2.25
I know how to handle unforeseen situations thanks to my resourcefulness.	2	2.25
I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.	1.75	2
I can usually handle whatever comes my way.	2.25	2.25
Total:	1.96	2.13

Note. Scale: 0 = *not at all true*, 3 = *exactly true*

Self-efficacy saw an increase from a total of 1.96 pre-summit to 2.13 post-summit. While there did not seem to be significant changes in any of the measurements, the most increase could be seen in the statement, “I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.”

Conversely, there was a slight decrease of 0.25 to the statement “It is easy for me to stick to my aims.”

Reflections

Cycle 5 further cemented the promising results that came from Cycle 4, this time quantitatively. While mindfulness experiences are hard to quantify, Cycle 5 sought to place numerical value on some of the benefits of mindfulness practice. Thus, I was excited to see that the numbers reflected the results that I was hoping for; namely, that self-awareness increased, stress and anxiety decreased, and self-efficacy increased thanks to mindfulness practice. The

results also confirmed my hypothesis in the correlation between mindfulness and leadership development, something that I felt intuitively but had not been able to confirm through existing literature. Through this data, I felt excited to think about the ways mindfulness practice could be incorporated into the field of leadership in the future. My hope is that this research could serve as a starting point for further research into the impact of practicing mindfulness on leadership development.

Finally, as both a leadership student and healing practitioner, I was able to bridge my two seemingly different identities together to enhance my skills and knowledge in both. As a leadership student, I learned through this research that leadership is enhanced by taking an integrative approach and connecting to all the aspects that make up the self- body, mind, and spirit. As a healing practitioner, this research gave me an opportunity to curate my knowledge and deliver it in a way that is both informative and helpful to others who are interested in learning other ways of existing. From the feedback I gathered from my participants, I also learned what is helpful and what I could do to improve to continue creating mindful spaces for others.

Summary

While there are many competencies that are said to be important for leaders to possess, adaptive leadership (2009) and authentic leadership (2004) state that self-awareness, stress and anxiety regulation, and self-efficacy are three critical competencies for effective leadership. This research carried out three mindfulness practice interventions on leadership students at the University of San Diego to examine the impact of mindfulness practices on aforementioned competencies. Over the course of four weeks, participants saw an increase in self-awareness, decrease in stress and anxiety, and increase in efficacy. Furthermore, participants found that they were able to entertain multiple perspectives and feel kindness and compassion both towards the

self and others. The results of this study showed promise of integrating mindfulness practices to foster adaptive and authentic leaders.

Recommendations

As this study did not directly assess leadership effectiveness, but rather the abilities that have been suggested as critical to leadership effectiveness in uncertain times, it would be worthwhile for future researchers to study the impact of mindfulness practices on behavioral attributes of effective leadership. It would also be beneficial to examine the impact of mindfulness practices on others in a leader-follower setting, as this study only sought to understand the internal experience of leaders who participated in such practices. Finally, while there was evidence to suggest that participants experienced increased self-awareness and self-efficacy, the time frame of this study of four weeks was most likely too short to see significant, and sustainable change. Practicing mindfulness is not something that happens overnight and consistency is part of the practice. Therefore, my recommendation is that future research should seek to gather data of the impact of mindfulness practices over a longer course of time to fully examine the effects on measured variables.

Conclusion

In recent years, leadership theories claim that competencies such as self-awareness, stress and anxiety regulation, and self-efficacy are critical leadership skills. As a leadership student and healing arts practitioner who seeks to bring a mindful and integrative approach, I felt that there was a connection between mindfulness and leadership, two very different fields of study. Through breathwork, yoga, and meditation, I researched the way mindfulness practices impacted leadership students at the University of San Diego, both at work and in their personal lives. I found that mindfulness practices enhance leadership competencies of self-awareness and

self-efficacy and decrease stress and anxiety. My research has proven that there is great potential for incorporating mindfulness practice in leadership development curricula. Furthermore, as someone who seeks to bring an integrative approach to leadership development and coaching, this research has strengthened my purpose and passion for bridging the field of leadership studies and healing.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email and Flier

Hello!

My name is Ayumi Tachikawa, a second year student in the Masters of Higher Education Leadership program. I am researching mindful leadership with a focus on developing leadership skills during uncertain times.

Let's face it: 2020 truly tested our capacity to deal with uncertainty. As we've entered the new year, it is important now more than ever that we, as leaders, take time to re-align ourselves to our inner purpose by connecting to our mind, body, and spirit so that we can engage and collaborate with others from a place of authenticity.

This research will examine the impact of mindfulness practices on three leadership qualities for uncertain times: self-awareness, stress and anxiety regulation, and resilience. Participants are invited to participate in four cycles of research that will total up to 180 minutes:

Part 1: Spirit (synchronous on Zoom, 45 minutes, mid-January 2021*)

In this workshop, you will join other participants to discuss current personal challenges in leadership. You will also engage in self-reflection activities to connect more deeply to yourself and set intentions.

Part 2: Body (asynchronous video delivered by email, 45 minutes, end of January 2021*)

In this module, you will follow a pre-recorded yoga sequence by yoga instructor Rebeca Camacho of Yogini Sea Solutions. After the yoga practice, you will be asked to complete a survey that will explore the connection between yoga and leadership.

Part 3: Mind & Emotion (asynchronous video delivered by email, 45 minutes, early February 2021*)

In this module, you will be guided through a pre-recorded meditation and breathwork sequence to quiet the mind and connect to your inner world. After the meditation, you will be asked to complete a survey that will explore the connection between meditation and leadership.

Part 4: Connect & Inspire (synchronous on Zoom, 45 minutes, mid-February 2021*)

In this workshop, you will engage in conversations with fellow participants to share experiences, insights, and takeaways on mindfulness and leadership and build community with like-minded leaders.

*Dates TBD after participants are confirmed.

*Zoom sessions will be audio recorded for research purposes.

If you would like to participate in this research, please respond no later than January 10th, 2021. If you have any questions regarding this research, please email atachikawa@sandiego.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

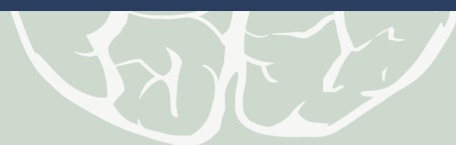
Ayumi Tachikawa
atachikawa@sandiego.edu

Supervisor: David Karp
dkarp@sandiego.edu

Journaling | Yoga | Meditation | Breathwork



Cultivating
**MINDFUL
LEADERSHIP**
in Uncertain Times



Connect to your mind, body, and
spirit in this four-part mindfulness
series to enhance your leadership in
the VUCA* world.

*volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity

TO PARTICIPATE, EMAIL ATACHIKAWA@SANDIEGO.EDU

Appendix B

Pre- Summit Survey

Questions:

1. What interested you to participate in this mindful leadership summit?
2. How do you define leadership?
3. What does leadership development mean to you?
4. On a scale of “never” to “always (everyday)”, how often do you practice mindfulness?
5. What type of mindfulness practice have you experienced before?
 - a. Meditation
 - b. Yoga
 - c. Breathwork
 - d. Journaling
 - e. Other*
6. On a scale of “almost always” to “almost never” please indicate how well each statement describes your experiences in the past 30 days:
 - a. I find it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present.
 - b. I tend to NOT notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.
 - c. It seems as if I am “running on automatic,” without much awareness of what I’m doing.
 - d. I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.
 - e. I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.
 - f. I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.
 - g. I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I’m doing right now to get there.
7. On a scale of “not present” to “very severe,” please indicate how you currently feel:
 - a. Anxious mood (worries, anticipation of the worst, fearful anticipation, irritability, etc.)
 - b. Tension (feelings of tension, inability to relax, restlessness, fatigability, tightness, etc.)
 - c. Fears (of communication, of inadequacy, of failure, of criticism, of responsibility, etc.)
 - d. Depressed mood (loss of interest, lack of pleasure, hopelessness, sadness, emptiness, self-blame, etc.)
 - e. Somatic symptoms (tightness in chest, choking feelings, upset stomach or digestive issues, headache, fatigue, pounding heart, etc.)
8. On a scale of “not true at all” to “exactly true,” indicate how well each statement describes how you currently feel:
 - a. It is easy for me to stick to my aims.
 - b. It is easy for me to accomplish my goals.
 - c. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
 - d. I know how to handle unforeseen situations thanks to my resourcefulness.
 - e. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
 - f. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.
9. How do you imagine mindfulness can contribute to leadership?
10. What do you hope to get out of this mindfulness leadership summit?
11. What is one leadership challenge you are currently facing?
12. How did the events of 2020 cause or impact this leadership challenge, if at all?

Appendix C

Post-Breathwork Survey

Questions:

1. On a scale of 0 to 10, what is your current level of stress when you think about this leadership challenge?
2. How would you be different without this challenge? Try writing in positive language.
3. On a scale of "not at all" to "extremely well," indicate how well each statement describes your experiences in the past 30 minutes.
 - a. I felt aware of what was happening inside of me.
 - b. I clearly physically felt what was going on in my body.
 - c. I felt that I was experiencing the present moment fully.
 - d. I noticed physical sensations come and go.
 - e. I felt in contact with my body.
 - f. I was aware of what was going on in my mind.
4. Please share any reflections or insights regarding your experience with breathwork.

Appendix D

Post-Yoga Survey

Questions:

1. On a scale of “not at all” to “extremely well,” indicate how well each statement describes your experiences in the past 30 minutes.
 - a. I felt aware of what was happening inside of me.
 - b. I clearly physically felt what was going on in my body.
 - c. I felt that I was experiencing the present moment fully.
 - d. I noticed physical sensations come and go.
 - e. I felt in contact with my body.
 - f. I was aware of what was going on in my mind.
2. Please share any reflections or insights you had during and after yoga. Make any connections to leadership or your leadership challenge if applicable.

Appendix E

Post-Meditation Survey

Questions:

1. On a scale of “not at all” to “extremely well,” indicate how well each statement describes your experiences in the past 30 minutes.
 - a. I felt aware of what was happening inside of me.
 - b. I clearly physically felt what was going on in my body.
 - c. I felt that I was experiencing the present moment fully.
 - d. I noticed physical sensations come and go.
 - e. I felt in contact with my body.
 - f. I was aware of what was going on in my mind.
2. Please share any reflections or insights you had during and after meditation. Make any connections to leadership or your leadership challenge if applicable.
3. How do you envision this practice to help you exercise leadership during uncertain times?

Appendix F

Focus Group Questions

Questions:

1. What is your check-in word?
2. What drew you to participate in this research?
3. What was your overall experience? What did you get out of this “summit”?
4. What are the benefits of being present?
5. After participating in this, one thing that is becoming clear to me is...

Appendix G

Post-Summit Survey

Questions:

1. On a scale of “almost always” to “almost never” please indicate how well each statement describes your experiences in the past 30 days:
 - a. I find it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present.
 - b. I tend to NOT notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.
 - c. It seems as if I am “running on automatic,” without much awareness of what I’m doing.
 - d. I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.
 - e. I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.
 - f. I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.
 - g. I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I’m doing right now to get there.
2. On a scale of “not present” to “very severe,” please indicate how you currently feel:
 - a. Anxious mood (worries, anticipation of the worst, fearful anticipation, irritability, etc.)
 - b. Tension (feelings of tension, inability to relax, restlessness, fatigability, tightness, etc.)
 - c. Fears (of communication, of inadequacy, of failure, of criticism, of responsibility, etc.)
 - d. Depressed mood (loss of interest, lack of pleasure, hopelessness, sadness, emptiness, self-blame, etc.)
 - e. Somatic symptoms (tightness in chest, choking feelings, upset stomach or digestive issues, headache, fatigue, pounding heart, etc.)
3. On a scale of “not true at all” to “exactly true,” indicate how well each statement describes how you currently feel:
 - a. It is easy for me to stick to my aims.
 - b. It is easy for me to accomplish my goals.
 - c. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
 - d. I know how to handle unforeseen situations thanks to my resourcefulness.
 - e. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
 - f. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.
4. On a scale of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” please indicate how well each statement describes your experience:
 - a. The content is relevant to my leadership development.
 - b. The content is relevant to my job.
 - c. The content is relevant to my studies at USD.
5. Please select one of the statements below that best describes how you feel about mindfulness moving forward:
 - a. I am not thinking about adding a mindful practice into my routine within the next six months.
 - b. I am thinking of incorporating more mindfulness within the next six months.
 - c. I am thinking of incorporating more mindfulness within the next month.
 - d. I have a routine mindfulness practice and I am working to maintain it.